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FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Implementing Peer-Assisted Learning
Margarita Calderón, Ph.D. • April 2007

Topic: Teaching Literacy in English to K-5 English Learners
Practice: Schedule Peer Learning

Highlights (short version)

- Definition of peer-assisted learning
- Benefits of peer-assisted learning—vocabulary practice, reading fluency development, comprehension practice, feedback on performance
- Skills learned through cooperative learning that go beyond content—social skills, self-regulation, how to evaluate own performance, understanding of U.S. classrooms and how to be a better learner

Highlights (extended version)

- When peer activities can be used and how long they should last
- The influence of cultural background on cooperative learning
- Norms and routines for cooperative learning
- Examples of the discourse of cooperative learning
- Examples of using peer activities to teach vocabulary
- Professional development that teachers are apt to need to implement cooperative learning

About the Interviewee

Margarita Calderón has taught ESL and bilingual classes in elementary, middle, and high schools, has been a bilingual program director, and has taught graduate courses on educational leadership/administration and bilingual teacher education. Calderón's 100+ publications include teachers' manuals, journal articles, and books. She is a principal research scientist for the Center for Research on Education of Students Placed at Risk (CRESPAR) at Johns Hopkins University, and is co-principal investigator for the NICHD study on the transition from Spanish reading into English reading. Calderón directs the El Paso Adult Bilingual Curriculum Institute, and has recently been appointed to the National Literacy Panel on Language Minority Children and Youth. Calderón has a doctorate from Claremont Graduate School with an emphasis on multicultural education and organizational development.

Full Transcript (short version)

My name is Margarita Calderón, and I'm a research scientist and professor at Johns Hopkins University.

Peer-assisted learning comes in various forms. It's either "cooperative learning," "group learning," or it's also called "collegial learning," at times, but the important aspect is that students are learning together. They work in teams. They practice a variety of instructional strategies. They practice something new that they are learning, but it's not an end in itself. It's not just an activity, it's not just a product that they are developing, it's actually learning together, so that at the end, you have something really meaningful, and students can actually be tested on what they worked on, and everyone should have excellent results.

The benefits of peer-assisted learning for ELLs are many, many, many. It starts with vocabulary. If they have an opportunity to practice vocabulary with someone else, that is the BEST thing that can happen to ELLs. Then, the partner reading: they need to hear their voices, they need to hear their fluency, they need to pronounce those words or hear someone else pronounce those words. They need feedback from their buddies. If they make a mistake, then someone should help them out, or else they themselves recognize it as soon as they are reading out loud, and someone is there. It's not the same thing for us to read aloud by ourselves, and when someone else is actually there to give you feedback. So, that's a great benefit.

When it comes to making meaning out of a text, to really understanding, to asking questions about that text, it's better to have someone there with you as well. It could be a more capable peer, or it could be a peer who is exactly in the same position as you are, in the same level, or it could even be a peer that's at a lower level.

We see the SIFE students, the students with interrupted (formal) education, who come and have to learn decoding from the beginning. They have no words of English, but they struggle together with a peer, and it goes much faster. So, in any level of proficiency, partner activities are much, much more beneficial.

Of course, when it comes to writing, it's even better. It's very difficult for anyone to write. I think typical students have difficulty writing, but when they are writing with others, it just makes it so much better. All around, it's just more beneficial.

One of the overarching aspects of cooperative learning is that the students are learning social skills. They are learning skills for the future. They are learning self-regulation skills—how to evaluate their own performance, how to evaluate their own learning.

All of that is part of cooperative learning. Those are the things that newcomers need. Those are the things that English language learners who come from other countries and really have no idea about what schooling is in this country—they are able to learn right there in class, and begin to figure out the schooling system. Sometimes, we try to go through content, we try to test too much, we try to focus too much on things that do not help the students really feel comfortable in the classroom, and really know what it is that they need to know, and where they need to go in order to become better learners.

Full Transcript (extended version)

My name is Margarita Calderón and I'm a research scientist and professor at Johns Hopkins University.

Peer activities can be used all the time, every day, every class period. So it's important to use a variety of cooperative learning strategies that range from one minute to maybe three minutes, five minutes, and 15 minutes at the most. Students can accomplish a lot in 15 minutes. I've interviewed students, I've walked into a classroom and I've asked them, "Oh, how long have you been working on your product?"

"Oh, since yesterday."

"Okay, and what have you learned so far?"

"How to color."

"And what else have you learned?"

"How to use this cognitive map."

"Okay, and what are you putting in the cognitive map?"

"Well, I'm copying from the book."

Sometimes students get caught up in the product, in making something so beautiful and making something so exciting that they lose the content. They forget how to really synthesize the information that they've learned and all they wind up doing is copying or writing some very simple sentences because they have been so busy creating this beautiful poster or this beautiful thing.

So cooperative learning can be used in all the subject areas, in all the grade levels, but always measuring time. Always giving the students a very specific time for them to finish. And as I mentioned earlier, the majority of the cooperative learning strategies only take about a minute, three minutes. Even partner reading should not go beyond 10 minutes. When they're working with vocabulary words, one minute at the most; 30 seconds to use the word in context is long enough. And so the timing is critically important as well as the type of strategy.

We know that for some students that come from certain cultural backgrounds it is so much easier to do cooperative learning. They're so used to working with peers that they immediately cluster, come together, work together. It makes it easy for a teacher to establish cooperative learning norms. But for other cultures, it's not as easy. Some cultures are more independent learners, they're not used to collaborating or working with someone else. And so it's important for the teachers to begin cooperative learning protocols from day one.

From the very first day of school, the teachers can set up these norms that we're going to work together like this. They can start out with pairs. They don't have to start out in teams of four immediately. Sometimes if two students or three students are from the same cultural background, they will want to sit together and work together, and that's fine. That's a great beginning. Gradually, however, it is important maybe toward the end of the first year to begin to move into more heterogeneous teams. The more frequently the teachers use the cooperative learning strategies, the more comfortable the students are going to feel working with peers.

In addition to using them frequently, it's important for teachers to also teach them the discourse of cooperation. How do we cooperate? How do we say when we want to interrupt someone? What do we say when we want to offer a suggestion? Even if our English is limited, what is the polite way of saying, "Okay, enough. Let me do this by myself" without hurting someone's feelings? How do you ask for help so that someone really wants to help you? The discourse of cooperation is even difficult for other students. And so some very key words, some short phrases, a lot of modeling by the teacher and the teacher thinking out loud, "Okay, so how do I say this very nicely so that my team doesn't get mad at me? Or they misinterpret what I'm trying to say since my English is so limited?" So a list of words, a list of phrases, that's part of setting up a nice cooperative learning technique.

Another important aspect of the discourse of cooperation is teaching students how to get feedback. Feedback is key. It's not just a discussion. It's not just learning in teams. But it's also creating a context where we can give feedback to each other. How are we doing on this? How is the team growing together? How do we do this aspect of learning versus another one? How is our product coming along? Feedback on learning, feedback on the process of learning is important. And when a teacher models giving feedback or models debriefing so that the students learn how to debrief within their teams, learn how to learn about their ways of learning. Those metacognitive strategies we call learning to learn can also take place even when students are very limited English proficient. There are ways of coming up with different lists of words or small phrases for the feedback section, for the debriefing section. And so we see teams working with… sometimes the teachers will actually scotch tape the lists for students to begin their conversations in teams. Then they have another list that

is also taped to the tables so that when they finish their activity, they have this whole list of other phrases to go back and debrief, give each other feedback. In other words, evaluate their own work.

Self-regulation is part of cooperative learning. The teachers also feel very comfortable with paired reading and paired instruction all around. What they typically like to do is to first of all model how students work in pairs. Not only for reading but also for all the different components of language development, of writing, of working in teams to consolidate knowledge. When they're pre-teaching vocabulary before the students are going to actually read a text, they start out by introducing ways of learning vocabulary. We usually talk about six steps and that sixth step in teaching vocabulary after a teacher has modeled the word, has asked the students to pronounce the word three times, has given a dictionary definition, student-friendly definition, the most important step is when the teacher asks the students to interact with that word, either to come up with different sentences, to answer a couple of questions, to do something with their partner. So, they use simple strategies like turn to your partner and discuss something and be sure to use the new vocabulary word.

A student needs about 12 production opportunities to really master a new word. Unless they use that word, they apply it in a meaningful context and they make it their own, it's very difficult to know if they really have mastered new vocabulary. This works quite efficiently if the students have opportunities to practice that word with their partners before they read. During the reading, of course, they encounter the word again and they talk about the word and they use the word when they do their summaries. But then later on when there are other cooperative learning activities to consolidate the knowledge, to make sure that they learn the content not just the language, but also the content that they are reading, that's when they come back and they encounter those words. Then, the final step is when they have to write about what they read. When they write with their partners, they come back to those words and so once again, they are exposed to new vocabulary words, they remember that these are new, that they have to use them, and so vocabulary becomes theirs. New words become their own words because they've used them so much, they've played with them, applied them, worked with their partners or worked with teams to use these words.

If we want students to be successful in cooperative learning, we need to make sure that teachers experience that same success in the professional development for cooperative learning. Professional development is the key to cooperative learning. Teachers need the kind of activities during their in-service, even before school starts, that entails a lot of ways of looking at cooperative learning. First of all, they need trainers to model what cooperative learning looks like. They need to see it, they need someone to demonstrate the strategies, they need to feel it. Second, they themselves need to practice with the strategies right there at the in-service, before they go out there to the students, before the students are wondering what they're doing. Teachers need to practice and get a good handle on what the steps are, how to go about doing this. Third, they need to know why. They need to know why they're doing this. They need a good background on research. What about cooperative learning? Where did the research come from? It's important for them to know that throughout the ages, people have collaborated, but the first pieces of research came from Israel. One of the other studies that is in the What Works Clearinghouse now is my own study. For the last five years, we've been looking at ways of teaching reading through cooperative learning in various settings. And so, it doesn't matter if it's through bilingual instruction, through elementary instruction, middle school

instruction, secondary instruction, there are many, many models that are, have been scientifically researched, empirically tested, and then there are many other things that are out there that may not be so. And it's important for teachers and administrators to do some research and figure out which are the ones that really work. In addition to that, teachers are going to need a lot of coaching. They are going to need some follow-up workshops throughout the year. And also, teacher's learning communities, where teachers have time to work together with their colleagues to make sense of all of this cooperative learning strategy.

When teachers have opportunities to work together in schools, to get together and discuss how they are integrating cooperative learning into their lessons, to share some lessons, to talk about what works, what doesn't work, and also to share how their students are reacting to these things, that's what helps teachers grow.

In addition to comprehensive professional development, another important aspect that relates to teacher support is that all teachers in a school should participate in that kind of professional development. When a whole school does cooperative learning, it gives the message to the students that this is the norm. This is what we do here in the school. This is how we want our students to work throughout their school years and be successful.